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THE MYSTERIOUS BRAND;

Or, Frank Reade, Jr., Solving a Mexican Mystery.

By "NONAME."

The rider raised one gauntleted hand and struck the pommel of his saddle. Then he emitted a wild, strange laugh. "Who are ye and what sort of a contrivance do ye call that?" he asked. "This is the electric vehicle, the Vigilant," replied Frank, "and I am Frank Reade, Jr., her owner. We have come into New Mexico on an exploring tour."

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The Mysterious Brand;

OR,

Or, Frank Reade, Jr., Solving a Mexican Mystery.

A STORY OF THE WILD SOUTHWEST.

By "NONAME,"

Author of "The Desert of Death," "The Caribs' Cave," "The Lost Lake," "37 Bags of Gold," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE AFFAIR AT TRES PINOS.

THE little New Mexico town of Tres Pinos was in a state of tremendous excitement. The cause was surely a warrantable one.

In a well regulated eastern village it would have been sufficient to call a whole corps of expert detectives. For the strangest of mysteries pulled upon Tres Pinos.

Nominally a mountain mining town, Tres Pinos was also the rendezvous of cowboys, herders, half-breeds, Navajo and Apache Indians, in fact all types of the Western adventurer and plainsmen.

From near and far the roughest class of men on God's footstool turned in at Tres Pinos to test the virulent character of Bill Haines' whisky, or to gamble away their substance in the El Dorado den. At times there were several thousand souls in the town and vicinity.

Fights, duel and murders were not out of the ordinary. Lacking any organized Vigilance Committee, every man was supposed to make and enforce his own laws. Unfortunate indeed was he who could not defend his own.

One day in the very heart of this community, so case-hardened in crime, a man was found with throat cut from ear to ear. This would not have attracted a great deal of interest in itself.

But upon the man's cheek was a strange brand, made apparently with a red-hot iron.

The brand was something like the abbreviated prescription sign of a physician, and again not unlike an Egyptian hieroglyphic, or faintly resembling a Greek initial. But yet it was not one of those. If it had any translation whatever, none in Tres Pinos were smart enough to read it.

At first the sheriff—for Jack Sanborn officiated somewhat informally in that capacity—was disposed to regard the brand as a freak of the murderer. He had squared accounts with a foe, and it was his eccentric way of proclaiming it to stamp this brand on the dead man's face.

So no special effort was made to pursue an investigation.

The dead man was rolled in a Navajo blanket and buried on the hillside with other unknown dead, which was the tragic end of his career.

Two days later, however, another victim of the mysterious brand was found almost at the sheriff's cabin door.

This victim was a man well known in Tres Pinos—Long Jim Paine, a hunter and trapper from far away Idaho. His face bore the same strange brand.

Two hours later another man was found in the rear of the Tres Pinos Hotel. Life was hardly extinct. The same brand was found upon him.

Two more victims of the strange fiend were found the next day. In one week nine of the denizens of Tres Pinos had been buried, with the same strange brand upon each.

Then it was that the town began to wake up.

The few women in the place were terrorized. Children were kept at home and armed men scoured the region about.

But the unknown fiend could not be located. Yet hardly a night passed that some new victim was not found. A reign of terror began in Tres Pinos.

The superstitious Mexicans and Indians declared that a devil had descended upon Tres Pinos, and many of them left the place as if it was accursed. Even the hardy and practical miners and herders began to feel shaky.

When nightfall came, there was a dark pall settling down over Tres Pinos, a pall of horror and dread. Strong men patrolled the streets and everything was done to detect the murderer. Yet all efforts were baffled.

Indeed, the strange crimes began to increase. The mysterious brand was firmly photographed upon the horror-struck minds of all the denizens of the town.

Yet what could be done?

It seemed as if they were powerless. Tres Pinos began to depopulate. Every day bands of disaffected men struck out for new quarters.

This was by no means pleasing to Deming Chute, the owner of the great White Hawk gold mines. He was desirous of seeing the town grow and become a city.

In vain he had exerted his best powers to solve the mystery. It would not be unraveled.

He had offered fabulous rewards for the arrest of the mysterious assassin. He failed repeatedly. In his inner mind he fancied that the unknown was an enemy of his, and took this way of avenging a wrong.

And it soon began to look as if Deming Chute would be the only man left in Tres Pinos. The population were pouring right out of the place.

"Humph!" ejaculated Chute; "at this rate town lots here will become a matter of small value. I have too much money tied up in the realty of Tres Pinos to allow this to continue."

Deming Chute went home and sat down to think. It was the greatest problem of his life.

There was a vague, indefinable terror permeating his being. There was no telling what moment the assassin might single him out as the next victim.

He thought of his only living relative, a daughter, Ellice, who was dearer to him than the apple of his eye. What would be her fate?

"Yes," he decided, "something desperate must be done. This *must* be stopped. It is the most horrible affair I ever heard of in my life. The assassin shall be unearthed."

At this moment there came a tap on the door of his domicile. The magnate of Tres Pinos raised his head and said:

"Come in!"

The door opened.

A man crossed the threshold.

Chute looked sharply at him; then he motioned him to a seat and said:

"Ah, Sydney Varian, it is you, is it? Pray be seated."

The visitor's dark eyes gleamed and he smiled, showing a glittering row of white teeth under his black mustache. He was not a man who would impress one as a desirable acquaintance.

Tall and athletic in frame, his shoulders were abnormally large, and upon them, apparently without the semblance of a neck, sat a round bullet-shaped head with dark aquiline features. Everything in the man's appearance betokened him a villain.

He was armed, as every man in Tres Pinos always was. Far and wide Sydney Varian was known as a man of wealth and mystery.

Gold was always plenty with him. Where he got it, nobody knew, but he gave forth the report that he was the owner of a large and profitable ranch in Texas.

Few claimed intimate acquaintance with him. He traveled generally alone and never gambled. In all things he was to the denizens of Tres Pinos a complete mystery.

"Well, Mr. Chute," he said, affably, as he sank into the proffered chair; "the outlook in Tres Pinos at present is not a very bright one."

"Well, no, not just now!" replied the magnate.

"No clew as yet to the assassin?"

"Not as yet."

"Hum!"

Varian played with the fob of his gold chain a moment, while his shifting gaze roamed about the room.

"It's my opinion he is a shrewd fox," he continued. "And I think that he will give you a great deal of trouble. But he can be run to earth!"

"Eh?" exclaimed Chute, eagerly. "You think so—you have knowledge——"

"A clew!"

"Good! You will help me——"

"On one condition."

Chute looked at the other.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Sydney Varian cannot work for nothing. I pledge my word to run the monster to earth, and you will find it not hard to accord me the recompense I ask."

"Oh, Heaven bless you!" cried the magnate. "I will grant your request if you will but name it!"

Varian drew a deep breath.

"The hand of your daughter Ellice in marriage."

For a moment there was a tableau. The old man's face was marble white. He gave a gasp.

But the answer came not from his lips. A strong silvery voice sounded behind the villain. In an instant he sprung to his feet and faced a tall and beautiful young girl, whose eyes were blazing with scorn.

"Sydney Varian, you have had your answer from me once. I would rather die with the mysterious brand on my brow than become your wife!"

"You—you know not what you say," he began. But she pointed to the cabin door.

He slunk toward it. But ere it closed behind him, he gave father and daughter a look of frightful malevolence, and hissed:

"It may be your fate to wear the mysterious brand and yet live. You need expect no protection from me now. You have scorned me, and you shall pay the score!"

The door closed behind him. Then father and daughter were alone. Ellice fell half fainting into his arms.

"My daughter!" exclaimed Deming Chute, with a fearful shudder. "What are we going to do? I think I will send you East by the first stage."

"And leave you here alone, father? Never!"

The young girl slipped from her father's arms. Her face was now eager, her manner even buoyant.

"There is a plan," she cried. "Do you know Tom Beck told me——"

She paused in blushing confusion. Deming Chute only laughed.

"So Tom Beck has been here!" he exclaimed. "Well, never mind, my child. I think Tom is a manly, noble young fellow. Young hearts will be young, but while your old father lives——"

"I will never leave you!" cried Ellice, passionately flinging herself into his embrace; "forgive me, father! Tom—was here—I should have told you—and—he asked me——"

Deming Chute's face grew solemn.

"I know my child," he said, "and you have my blessing. At the present time, however, it is foolhardy to think of anything else but this great danger which threatens us all.

"You are right, my father," said Ellice. "And I think we can find assistance which will enable us to track down the villains. You know as yet no band of men have dared to enter the Black Valley, which they say is overhung with the vapors of death. Yet it is claimed that the secret assassin there finds his home. But Tom tells of a wonderful man with an electric invention, designed for the exploration of the valley, who is just now below here at Sunrise Creek. It is said that he can perform wonderful feats with his strange electric power. He is from the East and his name is Frank Reade, Jr."

Deming Chute gave a start.

"Why!" he exclaimed. "He is the great inventor! Everybody has heard of Frank Reade, Jr. And he is coming to explore Black Valley? Then, my child, we have found a powerful ally. God has answered our prayers, and there is a future for Tres Pinos yet. Ah, what is that?"

Both gave a start. A great blinding glare of light flashed in at the windows, though the hour was late and the darkness outside intense.

CHAPTER II.

THE WORK OF A DESTROYER.

DEMING CHUTE and Ellice were for a moment blinded by that unearthly glare. Then the rumble of what seemed like distant thunder came over the ledges above their mountain home.

One moment only did Chute hesitate. Then springing to the door, he cried:

"Have they fired the town? What does it mean!"

He flung open the door. There was a great pathway of brilliant light about the cabin.

While Chute paused in amazement a voice in unmistakable brogue came to his ears:

"Whurroo! there's a man in the cabin dare, hejahers! Wud yez spake to him, Misther Frank."

"Stop the machine, Barney!" was the reply, in a cheery voice. "We will see who lives here!"

The next moment Deming Chute and his daughter beheld a wonderful sight.

Down the broad mountain trail came a vehicle without horses, and such a strange vehicle as they had never seen the like of.

It was a great car with a cab-like top, windows of heavy plate glass, and mounted on a platform with wide tired wheels of steel and rubber. Its motive power was electricity, as could be seen by the occasional flashes and sparks emitted by the wheels and axles.

Down from a small door in the hood or cab of this remarkable vehicle there leaped two men. A third stood in the entrance.

He was as black as a coal, and was easily seen to be a negro. He was grinning in a good-natured fashion, and cried:

"Mebbe dem people kin tell yo' de way into dat valley, Marse Frank."

"We will see!" replied Frank Reade, Jr., a tall, handsome, young man, who now appeared before the inmates of the cabin. At his side was the Irishman who had first spoken, and whom he had called Barney.

"Good-evening, sir!" said the young inventor, politely. "Is this the trail to the town of Tres Pinos, may I ask?"

"This is the town of Tres Pinos," replied Chute, with a low bow. "Open the door wider, Ellice. Pray, walk in, gentlemen, and welcome to our mountain home."

"I thank you," replied Frank Reade, Jr. "But I hardly think I will tarry. Is this one habitation all there is of Tres Pinos?"

"Bless you, no sir!" replied Chute. "The main part of the town lies beyond yonder pine ridge. But I have heard of your coming, and—I may as well tell you who I am—Deming Chute, the founder and first settler of Tres Pinos."

Frank Reade, Jr., gave a start.

"Well," he exclaimed, "we are indeed in luck! I will not go further than to-night. Barney, you may go back to the Vigilant and make everything ready for the night. At your service, Mr. Chute."

A moment later Deming Chute had thrown logs upon the hearth, and a cheery fire was dispelling the chill of the autumn evening.

Ellice Chute hastily prepared some hot drink for the two men. Then the conversation began.

Deming Chute explicitly rendered the exact state of affairs, dwelling upon the mysterious brand and the long series of inexplicable crimes which had cursed the town.

Frank listened with horror and surprise. When Chute had finished his narrative, he said:

"The purpose of my visit to this part of the country is ostensibly to explore the Black Valley, of which I have heard so many wonderful reports.

"But I can assure you, Mr. Chote I shall combine with that purpose a resolution to unearth this mystery. If it is within my power, I will bring that murderous wretch to justice. Rest assured of that."

"Heaven bless you!" cried Chute, fulsomely. "You will get your reward. You are a public benefactor. Tom Beck will be here to-morrow and——"

"Tom Beck!" exclaimed Frank. "Why that is the young man whom I met at Sunrise. He gave me an inkling of this affair. His theory is that this murderous gang hold forth in the Black Valley!"

"Yet, I cannot understand that," declared Chute. "I have never visited the valley myself, but I have heard that no living man can cross it on account of the poisonous gases. Hundreds of venturesome explorers' bones are whitening in the pestilential sands of the Black Valley. The Indians shun it as a curse and affirm it the abode of evil spirits."

Frank smiled.

"It may all be true," he said; "but I have an idea that the human bones are only fossil remains, and that the deadly gases are but steam from geysers and hot springs. Have you ever met a man who has set foot in the Black Valley?"

Chute shook his head.

"I cannot say that I ever have," he said.

"Then what real proof have we that the gases seen to rise from the Black Valley are deadly? The average Mexican and plainsman is superstitious to the highest degree!"

"Yes!"

"Very well! I think you will find that it is all superstitious fear!"

"Then——"

"What?"

"You will invade the valley?"

"I shall!"

"You are well prepared?"

"Yes. I have so fixed my machine that I can hermetically seal every door and window, and exclude the deadly gases, if they are deadly. That I shall ascertain by certain chemical tests."

Chute drew a deep breath.

"Mr. Reade," he said, "you are a man of science. You will see

ceed. If you prove that the Black Valley is a safe place for any man to go across you will render Tres Pinos a mighty benefit."

"I shall prove it!"

"May good fortune go with you!"

Frank rose to leave the cabin. As he reached the door a strange sound came to the ears of all.

Far down in the valley a wild eerie yell was heard. It was a long-drawn, awful cry of mortal agony.

"What is that?" exclaimed Frank.

Ellice gave a little scream and both Chute and his daughter turned white as ghosts. Frank Reade, Jr., looked at them and exclaimed:

"Do you think—can it be—the strange assassin?"

Chute recovered with an effort.

"It may be another victim," he said. "Oh, such wanton murder!"

Frank's eyes blazed.

"Then we are wasting time here," he cried. "Barney, turn on the dynamos. We will go down there at once, and Heaven help the wretch if I get hold of him!"

"All roight, sor," cried the Celt.

But before further move could be made a strange thing happened. The clutter of horses' hoofs was heard, and up the mountain side came a rider and panting steed.

The next moment, breathless, he flung himself from the saddle, and there stood a tall, handsome young man, in miner's garb, before them.

"Tom Beck!" pealed from Chute's lips.

"Ellice—Mr. Chute! Thank God!" panted the young miner. "You are safe! Oh, I feared that the awful death might strike here before I could get here!"

Chute gripped Tom Beck's arm.

"Tom," he exclaimed, hoarsely, "is the fiend abroad again to-night?"

The young miner jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"Did you not hear a cry down there just now?" he asked.

"Yes!"

"Well—that was the death cry of Andrew Mayne, poor fellow! We just picked him up by the Golden Gate Mill. Poor fellow! The brand was on his cheek."

Chute gave a shuddering cry. He turned to Frank Reade, Jr.

"You see," he said. "Satan has an emissary in Tres Pinos!"

Frank Reade, Jr.'s bosom swelled. His eyes were like blazing stars.

"And yet you will permit this thing to go on?" he cried.

"What can we do?" asked Chute, helplessly.

"Do? Organize a Committee of Safety. If necessary huddle in a block house all your people, put out guards, and then send armed men over every inch of the country for one hundred miles about. Some clew *must* be found. I am with you heart and soul."

Tom Beck gave a glad cry.

"Heaven bless you, sir!" he cried. "I feel sure we have a powerful friend in you."

"I met you at Sunrise?"

"Yes, sir."

"You did not tell me it was as bad as all this."

"Indeed, we have been all hoping that the end would soon come."

"Then something has been done?"

"Yes, but the men sent out to find the mysterious assassin are in deadly fear of him."

"Then they will accomplish nothing," declared Frank, impatiently. "Do not lose an hour or a minute. Rouse the town and organize at once. Are you well defended here?" turning to Chute.

"Yes," replied the magnate; "I have weapons in the house, and Ellice is a dead shot. Have no fear for us."

Tom Beck's face was gloomy. He caught Ellice's hand and said:

"If harm comes to you—then life is over for me!"

"Do not fear for me," said the young girl in an undertone. "I shall be brave and strong. You must do your duty, Tom, and then——"

A pressure of the hand, which meant worlds, and Tom Beck was in the saddle.

CHAPTER III.

IN PURSUIT OF THE FIEND.

"I WILL alarm the town," he said to Frank Reade, Jr., as he passed. "Will you come along?"

"Just as quickly as the Vigilant can get down the mountain," was the reply.

Away went Tom Beck down the trail. Then Frank Reade, Jr., gripped Chute's hand.

"Go back in the cabin, Mr. Chute, and stay with your daughter," he said; "we shall do all we can to catch the foul fiend!"

The aged magnate pressed Frank's hands and complied with his request. Then the Vigilant rumbled away down the mountain trail.

For the reader's benefit it might be well now to take a closer look at the Electric Vigilant.

Frank Reade, Jr., had laid the plans and constructed the Vigilant at his large machine works in Readestown.

His theory had been to construct a vehicle which should unite strength with lightness, speed with power. The Vigilant was so finely balanced upon patent springs that she could travel with comparative ease over the roughest of ground.

The body of the vehicle was of thinly rolled but bullet-proof steel.

She was long and narrow, yet quite roomy in regard to cabins and storage space. Placed on her platform or deck were two structures, the one in the stern being the main cabin, properly speaking, and forward the hood or pilot house, where were observation windows and the key-board, by means of which the dynamos were operated.

Below the pilot house in the main body of the Vigilant, were the electric engines.

Through the steel prow there projected the thin light barrel of a dynamite gun, a remarkable invention of Frank's, the secret of which he alone possessed.

Over the pilot house was a powerful electric search-light. Forward was a small balcony or deck just over the gun.

The Vigilant's cabin was handsomely furnished in plush and silk, and on board were all sorts of weapons and materials essential upon a long trip in a wild country.

Nicely balanced upon easy springs with her rubber-tired wheels the Vigilant was a vehicle of luxury and comfort, as well as a traveling arsenal for offense and defense.

On a smooth surface she could easily make railroad speed. On the level plains this was a mighty point of vantage.

Down the mountain trail the Vigilant rolled, Barney at the wheel. The trail was by no means always a safe one.

At one point the Vigilant made its way along the verge of a precipice several hundred feet in depth. The least deviation here would send the machine to eternity.

And suddenly at the very narrowest part of this trail, Barney suddenly brought the machine to a halt.

"What is the matter?" asked Frank, as he sprang into the cab.

"Bejabers, sor, there's an obstruction in the path, sor!"

Just ahead in the search-light's glare stood a horseman.

He was a tall, dark figure, sitting there like a veritable Centaur. His slouched hat shaded his features.

Frank regarded him in astonishment.

"Well!" he exclaimed, "it's lucky you saw him, Barney. Another yard and we might have crowded him off the wall into the depths."

"Shure enough, sor, but phwy don't he go back, I'd like to know?".

Frank stepped out on the little deck forward and cried:

"Ahoy, stranger!"

For a moment there was no answer. Frank then said:

"The trail is narrow at this point and we can hardly pass. As it is difficult for us to pass, I would beg of you to go back and find a broader place. It is easier for you than for us. Will you kindly do this?"

The rider raised one gauntleted hand and struck the pommel of his saddle. Then he emitted a wild, strange laugh.

"Who are ye and what sort of a contrivance do ye call that?" he asked in a rasping voice.

"This is the electric vehicle, the Vigilant," replied Frank. "And I am Frank Reade, Jr., her owner. We have come into New Mexico on an exploring tour."

"Oho!" was the sneering reply. "So you are the chap who is going to leave his bones with hundreds of others in the Black Valley. I have heard of you!"

"I have no idea of leaving my bones there!" replied Frank, "and I fully intend to explore it."

"Ye do?"

"Yes."

"Humph! You'll find it a big contract. As we can't pass on this trail I'll ask you to go back to where the trail is broad enough for me to continue my journey. My time is valuable and I don't care to be hindered."

Frank's face flushed.

"I beg your pardon!" he said; "but it is quite impossible for us to go back. It is an easy matter for you to turn your horse and ride back a short distance. I am sorry to delay or trouble you, but it is unavoidable."

"I decline to do so!"

Frank was surprised as well as angry at the display of this unreasonableness. For a moment he knew not what to say.

"I don't see that it is a matter of choice," he said; "it looks to me like necessity."

"Ah, then you will compel me?"

"Nothing of the kind. It is a simple request."

"Bah! I decline."

"Is that earnest?"

"It is."

"Then," said Frank, resolutely, "it relieves me of all responsibility if I go ahead. I cannot remain here, and you must give us the right of way, which is as much ours as yours—or you will take the consequences."

"You will not dare to run over me."

"Who are you?"

"You shall learn before you have been long in Tres Pinos," was the malevolent reply. "But I will give you my name. I am Sydney Varian. That name spoken in Tres Pinos will furnish you ample proof that in daring me you are incurring no small obligation."

"I care little for your threats sir," said Frank, coldly, "but I shall remember your name. Now will you kindly step from my path? This is the last request."

Sydney Varian did not reply.

Frank stepped back into the pilot house where he met Barney. They were for a moment puzzled.

"Shure, sor, we must go ahead," said the Celt. "It's small loss, I'm afther thinkin', if we do run over the omadhonn."

"There's no other way," said Frank, resolutely; "but I think he will get out of the way if we push ahead!"

"Is it go ahead, sor?"

"Yes!"

Barney stepped up to the key-board. He glanced adown the trail, and then gave a sharp cry.

"Shure, Misther Frank," he cried, "he's no longer there, sor!"

This was true.

Sydney Varian and his horse had vanished. Where he had gone it was not necessary to trouble about. It was sufficient that he was gone.

Frank at once started the machine again down the trail. In a few moments it was once more on a broader section of the trail. The lights of Tres Pinos were seen below.

But nothing was to be seen of Sydney Varian. A strange premonition had seized Frank.

"Sydney Varian," he muttered. "I shall remember that name. It is possible that he may be implicated in all the dark work going on in this region. We shall see!"

A loud roar came up from the little town below.

It was the sound of many hoarse voices raised in shouts of vengeance. It was the work of Tom Beck, who had roused the town effectually.

When the Vigilant finally slid down into the village street, a strange scene was revealed.

Torches were blazing, bon-fires were at every street corner, and in their fierce light bearded rough-clad men were seen brandishing their weapons, and calling hoarsely for vengeance.

Could they have got their hands upon the mysterious murderer at that moment his fate would have been a dreadful one to witness.

Beck had spread broadcast the news of the coming of the Vigilant and Frank Reade Jr., so when it appeared a great shout went up.

A great throng gathered about the machine, and when Frank appeared on the deck the cheering was deafening.

Frank addressed the crowd:

"Men of Tres Pinos! I have just heard of the terrible work which has been going on in this region for the last month; my sympathy and my whole heart is with you, and I shall co-operate with you to the best of my ability in tracking down the owner of the mysterious brand.

"Fiend that he is, no life can be safe in Tres Pinos until he is brought to the wall. My advice is to concentrate your forces. Place your women and children and helpless ones in one part of the town in as small compass as possible. Then organize in parties of a dozen armed men. Be never out of sight of each other. Form a line about these mountains and sweep their sides to the mountain peaks. Leave no hole, nook or cranny unexplored. You will find the wretch and then give him a fair trial and let justice be done. Do you approve of this plan?"

Deafening were the cheers. The rough miners gathered in groups and began to organize.

Frank lent all the assistance in his power, with the aid of young Beck. In this manner, before the sun was up, all was ready for concerted action.

A great cordon of men was extended around the valley of Tres Pinos. Then within easy communication of each party of twelve, this line began to converge and sweep across the entire region.

As it crept on, narrowing the circle all the while, no spot was left unsearched. Every hole or nook was thoroughly examined.

But as the day wore on, it became more and more evident to the searchers that the cunning fox was not in their net.

Before nightfall all had met in a glen in the heart of the wild region. It was a disappointed body of man-hunters, wearied and footsore.

CHAPTER IV.

A MOMENT OF PERIL.

Not the slightest clew to the foul fiend had been found. Darkness was shutting down fast.

Weary and discouraged, the entire party returned slowly to the town. Full fifteen hundred armed men they were.

It was a literal army. Yet despite their numbers, one unknown assassin held them all in defiance.

It was a later hour when the Vigilant returned to Tres Pinos.

Frank Reade, Jr., with Barney and Pomp, had been all over the western foothills and beyond, but not a clew had they found.

There was profound silence when the machine bowled up to the door of Joe Ladue's hotel, where most of the searching party were gathered.

They were utterly discouraged, completely puzzled and non-enthusiastic. Frank saw how affairs were at once.

He said nothing, however.

Tom Beck greeted him eagerly when he alighted.

"No clew?" he asked.

"Not the slightest."

"That is too bad!"

"You found nothing?"

"Not a thing."

Frank was reflective a moment; then he said:

"Come into the bar-room. We must talk the matter over. I have an idea."

"An idea?"

"Yes."

"Good! I shall be glad to hear it."

They entered the bar-room and seated themselves at a table. Rough men were all about them, drinking and playing cards.

Frank called for a glass of wine; then looking sharply at Tom, he asked:

"You are acquainted with nearly everybody in Tres Pinos?"

"Nearly everybody."

"You are just the man I want."

"What do you mean?"

"I will explain, but first I will tell you my new theory. This mysterious assassin is no doubt right among you all the time. Doubtless he was in your search party to-day."

Beck gave a violent start.

"A wily fox. You have hit it."

"I believe it."

The gaze of the two men met. After a few moments Beck asked:

"Whom do you suspect? Do you know anybody in Tres Pinos?"

"Very few," replied Frank; "I am depending on you. Knowing everybody here, think of those whom you might suspect as capable of such a deed."

Beck looked puzzled.

"I—I can really think of no one," he said. "Really—the crime is so atrocious, it seems as if none but a madman would lend himself to it."

"That is true. Yet I can assure you, this is not the work of a madman, but a person as sane as you or I."

"You believe it?"

"I do."

Beck was thoughtful.

"Really I can locate no one as worthy of suspicion," he said. "Yet your idea is a good one, and I shall begin to watch every man with whom I come in contact."

"That is proper!" said Frank; "now I have one more question to ask!"

"Well!"

"Do you know Sydney Varian?"

Beck started as if shot. For a moment a strange light leaped from his eyes. He drew a hard, short breath.

"Sydney Varian!" he exclaimed. "By Jove! I never thought of him. Do you know him?"

Frank told the circumstances of his meeting with Varian the night before. Beck listened with interest.

"He is a mysterious man!" he said. "I hardly know what to think of him, and yet—he is the most likely man I know of to be connected with this crime."

"If I mistake not," said Frank, "he is in love with Deming Chute's pretty daughter. Is it true?"

Tom Beck's face flamed.

"It may be!" he said, scornfully. "His chances are slight!"

"So I should assume. Yet I think he is a dangerous man and a good one to watch. Does he not frequent this place?"

"Yes."

"If he comes in will you point him out to me?"

"Certainly." Tom Beck's gaze swept the room. Then he said:

"But he is not here now. He may come in later. Your story of his strange threats makes it look queer for him. Yet—on my word! I can hardly believe that Varian is so hardy a criminal."

Frank nodded his head.

"It may not be!" he said. "Yet we must pursue every clew."

"Of course, and this is the most tangible we have yet struck. I look for him to appear at any moment."

"Heigho!"

"What is that?"

Both sprung up. Indeed every man in the bar-room was on his feet. A dull roar was heard down the village street.

It drew nearer. A great crowd of men were surging toward the hotel. In their midst they carried a half conscious man.

Into the bar-room out of the dark night they came. The wounded man, for wounded he was, was placed in a reclining position.

Then every spectator gave a gasp as he drew nearer and saw upon the pallid cheek of the victim the strange and mysterious mark, the unknown brand.

Pandemonium, which had reigned in the bar-room, was superseded by a hush of terror and awe.

"The only man living who has received the brand," was the muttered sentiment. "How did he escape with his life?"

"He'll tell when he gits stronger."

"It's Sam Thomson!"

"He's the strongest man in the mines!"

"Ha! He's going to speak!"

Whisky pressed between the wounded man's lips revived him. Then he opened his mouth and spoke:

"Ah, it was a terrible struggle. How did I come here? What saved me?"

By degrees Thomson recovered sufficiently to tell his story. It was listened to with interest by the crowd.

His wounds were not mortal, and when he had finished, it became evident to his hearers that his assailant had not meant to make them so.

This fact added to the intense mystery of the affair. Had the maker of the mysterious brand changed his method? Had he sickened of wholesale slaughter?

The account rendered by Thomson was a thrilling one.

He was returning home from his claim by way of the Golden Gate

Mill. Just as he passed through a narrow defile some dark object leaped up in his path and grappled with him.

He simply knew that he became unconscious. When he came to he crawled out into the trail and was picked up by passersby.

He could not describe his assailant. Neither could he tell whether it was an animal or a human being which had borne him down, though the mysterious brand of course established the fact that it was the latter.

Excitement now ran high in the crowd. Everybody was thirsting for a genuine lynching party.

Shortly after this, Thomson was taken away to his cabin. Comparative quiet settled down once more in the bar-room.

Frank and Tom Beck again seated themselves and resumed their discussion. They had talked but a few moments when Beck placed a hand on Frank's arm.

"Look!" he whispered. "There is your man—Varian!"

Frank looked up and saw a tall, dark man lounging at the bar. It was Sydney Varian, dressed in a dark, velvet jacket, black breeches and riding boots. He was puffing a cigar.

The young inventor studied him keenly. He became well satisfied that he was not mistaken in his man.

He was a thorough villain.

Suddenly Varian's gaze wandered to the table where Frank and Beck sat. The expression of malevolence on his face was frightful to see.

Tom Beck quivered with fierce emotion. He recognized a foe—a species of deadly reptile, and his disposition was to crush it.

"God help me!" he breathed. "If that man comes in my path, I fear I shall become a murderer."

"He is a bad man," said Frank, slowly. "Keep your eye on him."

Varian turned to order a drink. As he did so, two men came hurriedly into the bar-room. One of them sprang forward and covered Varian with a revolver.

"Hands up!" he commanded, sternly.

It was Jack Sanborn, the sheriff.

Instantly the villain's right hand would have flown to his pistol butt. But he saw death in the sheriff's eye.

With a scowl and a curse his hands went up.

"What's the matter, you fool!" he hissed. "Why are you holding me up?"

"A very good reason!" replied Sanborn, sternly. "You were seen near the Golden Gate Mill when Thomson was assailed. There is a suspicion that you and the mysterious brand are one and the same."

A thunderbolt dropped in the bar-room could not have created greater excitement. Instantly all was pandemonium.

The crowd surged forward like fierce wolves.

"Hang him! Lynch him! He is the murderer! Kill him!"

Varian's face was ashen in its hue. He stood quivering like a fox run to its corner.

"What are ye trying to do?" he hissed. "I'm not the man. It's false. I tell ye, false as Hades!"

"Kill him! Lynch him!"

In vain Sanborn tried to fight the crowd back. He was hustled aside, a rope was thrown about Varian's neck, and he was hurried from the bar room.

Astonished and excited, Frank and Beck followed the party. Under a tree near by they halted.

A rope was thrown over a limb and in another moment Sydney Varian would have been dangling between Heaven and earth.

But at this critical moment Frank Reade, Jr., pushed his way to the side of the condemned man.

He displayed no weapon, but simply held up his hands. His voice was clear and penetrating.

It seemed to have the effect of a surprising check upon the gang. They instantly hushed and listened to the words of the famous inventor.

"Gentlemen!" said Frank, clearly. "You are acting rashly. This man may be guilty, but even if he is we must give him fair play!"

CHAPTER V.

THE ABDUCTION.

For a moment it was hard to tell just what effect Frank's words really had upon the crowd.

They maintained a strange, sullen silence. A minute passed, and then a hoarse voice went up:

"Lynch him!"

"Death to the murderer!"

Once more they surged forward, but again Frank's trumpet voice arrested them.

"Hold where you are!" he shouted. "I know that you are not beasts, but honest men! Then give this man a chance for his life!"

"Ay, ay! give him a chance!" was a faint cry in the throng. But a louder yell went up:

"He don't deserve it!"

"Yes, he does!" replied Frank. "You do not want to hang an innocent man ——"

"He is not innocent!"

"String him up!"

"You have not proved him guilty!" shouted Frank. "For the sake of mercy and charity, give him a chance! If he is the maker of the mysterious brand, the iron must be found upon him! We must search him!"

Logic had already begun to prevail. Now the cry went up:

"Yes, search him! Give him the chance."

Jack Sanborn then searched the prisoner. But the branding iron was not found upon him.

What would have been *prima facie* evidence was missing. It began to look brighter for Varian.

The villain gazed wonderingly at Frank. In his sordid selfishness of his nature, he could not understand why the young inventor should befriend him.

He could not appreciate that fine spirit of Frank Reade, Jr.'s, which led him to stickle for fair play and the sparing of the life of an innocent man.

Slowly the crowd began to come to their senses.

They listened to Frank's appeal now.

"If you can prove this man to be the right one," he cried, "I will help you hang him. But what is the use of hanging the wrong man? It does not subserve justice and only burdens your souls with a needless crime. Wait until you can prove this man guilty before you hang him!"

"That's right!" went up a yell.

"Fair play!"

"Hang the right man!"

"We'll get him yet!"

"Yes!" cried Frank Reade, Jr., "we will get him yet! Rest assured of that, my friends! I can almost promise you!"

Cheers went up and Frank cut Varian's bonds. As he did so, he whispered:

"If you are wise you'll get out of this part of the country. They are dead onto you here!"

The villain made no reply. He slank away into the crowd and disappeared. The affair was ended.

Back to the bar-room went that crowd, so thirsty for vengeance. It was their custom to execute first and investigate afterwards. This had been an exception to a notable rule.

Sydney Varian owed his life to Frank Reade, Jr. Yet the young inventor expected no return of friendship.

"Well," said Beck, when they were back in the bar-room, "you are not an ordinary man, Frank Reade, Jr."

"Why?" asked Frank.

"Why did you not let that wretch hang? The world would have been better off without him."

Frank shook his head.

"Never hang a man for a crime which he did not commit. Be sure to select one of which he is guilty."

"Of course that is right," admitted Beck.

An hour passed swiftly by. All types of men passed in and out of the bar-room. Frank and Beck watched them intensely.

But they could not decide upon a single suspicious person. The hour was now growing late.

Frank had arisen to propose going home when an uproar was heard in the street. The clattering of horses' hoofs, mingled with loud cheering, sounded clearly.

In an instant both men were upon the scene. A white horse, reeking with foam, was in the midst of the crowd.

An old man, white-haired and pallid, with bloody head and face, fell from the saddle. Tom Beck gave one glance, and an awful cry escaped his lips.

He tore through the crowd like a madman. There was good reason for this. In a moment he was by Deming Chute's head, for it was the magnate of Tres Pinos.

He was in time to hear but a few words dropping from the lips of the fainting man.

"God help her! My Ellice is gone, taken forcibly away! In the name of God raise Heaven and earth to find her!"

One moment Tom Beck reeled like a drunken man. Then he raised his right hand, and looking skyward, his lips moved in an earnest prayer.

Left in the cabin after the departure of the Vigilant, Ellice Chute and her father held an excited discussion upon various matters, and both united in the opinion that the mysterious assassin would yet strike a blow at them.

"Unless he takes me unawares, I shall give him all he wants," vowed the magnate. "Cold lead will stop him—if he be mortal."

Ellice was calm and brave, though she was very pale. During her long life in these western wilds, she had learned well how to use a revolver or a rifle.

She seldom ventured from the cabin unarmed, though she often descended to the town unattended.

She was known to all in Tres Pinos and was very popular. Wherever a poor miner's family needed help, in case of sorrow or sickness, she appeared on the scene like a ministering angel.

Not a rough border or miner in Tres Pinos but would have laid down his life for her.

Therefore she had only to fear some tough or dissipated gambler or Indian. Hitherto, however, she had feared nothing.

But the dreadful work of the mysterious assassin had filled her soul with a nameless terror. She feared not so much for her own safety as for that of her father.

It seemed to her that he had gained many enemies of late, and that this was the most terrible of all. Her whole being trembled for his safety.

The dull roar of the crowd from the town below came to their ears

as they sat in the little cabin. The hours passed until daylight came. There was no sleep for them until the dawn.

Then Ellice fell into a gentle slumber. Her father sat by her and watched her until almost the noon hour.

Later in the day Deming Chute ventured to descend to the town.

The searching party with the Vigilant were yet out. He could not wait for their return, but presently returned to the cabin.

As darkness shut down once more, Chute became anxious to know the result of the search. There seemed no way to find out save by descending to the town.

Yet he hesitated to do this and leave Ellice unprotected. He paced the cabin floor nervously.

The young girl tried to induce him to go.

"There will be no danger if they have caught the assassin," she said. "And there is no doubt but that they have. I can defend myself. Go, father!"

But Deming Chute hesitated. Finally he said:

"I will walk out on the bluff, Ellice. Perhaps somebody may come up the mountain trail from whom I can get news."

And this the Tres Pinos magnate did. From the bluff, less than one hundred yards away, he could look down upon the town.

He saw the gleaming lights and heard the distant uproar. He listened for the sound of a passerby on the trail.

And suddenly he heard footsteps.

"Hello!" shouted Chute. "Who goes there? Answer, stranger!"

He distinctly heard the click of a rifle hammer.

"Who are ye? Speak or I'll fire," came back the hoarse reply. "If ye're that devil with the mysterious brand ye might as well say your prayers."

"Set your mind at rest, friend, and put up your rifle. I'm Deming Chute."

"Oh!" replied the traveler. "It's you, is it, Mr. Chute? Yo give me quite a scare. I'm Jem Baxter!"

"Good, Jem! I am glad that you have come along. What is the news from the town?"

Jem Baxter, the miner, honest fellow and well known to Chute, now came up through the shadows.

"The news are bad, Mr. Chute," he said; "that black-hearted wretch cannot be found!"

"Is that true?"

"It is, sir, and the whole town has been on the trail all day. There's a red hot meeting down there now. What they'll do next I don't know!"

Chute drew himself up with a shudder.

"God help us!" he said; "this is by all means a hard outlook. So many innocent lives have been taken. Ah, it seems as if something ought to be done."

"That is true, sir," replied Baxter. "But the people all look to see that man with the electric wagon do something. Mebbe he will."

"Frank Reade, Jr.!" exclaimed Chute. "He is a wonderful fellow, and it will not surprise me if he does. Well, I thank you, Baxter, for the news. I will now go to my cabin. Ah! Great Heaven! What was that?"

He gave a fearful cry of terror, rage and agony blended, and started in a mad run for the cabin. The miner, Baxter, who was for a moment petrified, cocked his rifle and started after him.

A wild, shrill scream from feminine lips had rung out upon the night air. Then the clatter of horses' hoofs up the mountain side and a wild, devilish laugh.

These sounds, plainer than words, told the awful story to Deming Chute before he reached the empty cabin, which was already in flames. He dashed into it, however, regardless of the flames.

"Ellice! my child!" he screamed. "Fiend! devil! do not take my child away! Oh, God help me, what shall I do?"

He might have perished there in the flames had it not been for Jem Baxter, who rushed in and pulled him out.

For some moments the bereaved father was a maniac. He rushed finally to the little stable in the hillside and threw the saddle upon his best horse. Then away up the mountain side he went in useless pursuit.

Realizing finally the futility of this, he turned the horse's head toward the town and rode down recklessly to seek assistance and give the alarm. His coming created a furor.

CHAPTER VI.

TO THE RESCUE.

VOLUNTEERS were not lacking to go in quest of the abducted girl. But where were they to look for her?

This was the problem. Not a man in the great throng was capable of solving it.

Tom Beck had taken charge of Deming Chute. He was calm, but white-faced and determined.

To Frank he said:

"God shall judge between me and her abductor. When I find him I will take his life!"

"If he does her harm," modified Frank.

Beck ground his teeth.

"Have you any idea who her captor is?" asked Frank. "You do not think it is the murderous fiend who will murder her?"

"Sydney Varian is at the bottom of all!" gritted Beck, fiercely. "It was a mistake that you did not let the crowd lynch him. You may be sure of it! He went thither immediately after his liberation."

Frank saw that Beck was possibly right. He half regretted his interference now.

Varian was a cunning villain. He was now well satisfied of this. Just at present he held the winning cards.

But Frank gritted his teeth.

"I will bring him to town!" he said, grimly. "Depend upon it, within the week he shall receive his just deserts."

Beck had now succeeded in partly bringing Mr. Chute back to his senses. The old man came out of his agony in a strangely, calm manner.

And now the three men talked over the possibilities of the future. Frank was the one to formulate a plan.

"I think I have studied the whole matter out!" he said. "You will find that Sydney Varian's is not the only hand in this game."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Beck, in surprise. "What are your reasons for that belief?"

"I base my theory upon conclusions which I will not attempt to explain just yet," replied Frank. "Yet I think that developments in the near future will prove that I am correct. I believe that Varian is only one of an organized gang, and that there is some secret and deadly purpose to depopulate the town of Tres Pinos and restore this region to its original wildness."

Both Beck and Chute looked at Frank in amazement. Then the old magnate gasped:

"Just my premonition, Mr. Reade. Full three hundred have left Tres Pinos since the scare of the mysterious brand. It is a villainous game!"

"But what would be the object gained? What the recompense?" asked Beck.

"That remains to be determined," replied Frank. "We can only guess at present. I am convinced, however, that if we go ahead on this reasoning we shall meet with success."

"But where are his accomplices?"

"Perhaps right in our midst, disguised as miners, herders or Indians. Nothing could be easier!"

"Very true!"

"Where do you think they have taken Ellice?" asked Chute.

"Doubtless to some hiding place in these hills. I would not be afraid to venture that it is the Black Valley itself."

"Impossible!"

"Why?"

"The Black Valley holds deadly gases. No living being can stay there!"

"Humph!" said Frank, incredulously. "I do not attach credence to that. We do know that every nook and corner of these hills have been examined by our searchers."

"Yes!"

"And without result?"

"Yes!"

"Very good. The Black Valley alone remains as a harbor of refuge for the villainous gang. It is there we shall find our clew to this mystery!"

Deming Chute arose.

"Mr. Reade," he said. "I am inclined to believe that you are right. It can do no harm at least to visit this Black Valley and learn the truth. I am with you heart and soul!"

"And so am I!" said Tom Beck. "I think I can enlist a hundred men at once."

"We do not need them," replied Frank. "There are enough of us, with the aid of the Vigilant. Will you be ready to go with me to the Black Valley by daylight?"

"We will," replied both.

A few moments later Frank was again on board the Vigilant. Barney and Pomp were anxiously awaiting his return.

"Shure, sor," declared Barney. "It's ourselves as thought some harrum had cum to yez, Misther Frank, an' I was mesilf for goin' out to look after yez!"

"Golly," cried Pomp, "he neber wud hab fo't ob dat if I hadn't tole him ob it!"

"Shut up, yez black hoodoo," cried Barney, angrily. "Yez allus have to put yez oar in ivery toime!"

Pomp made a grimace at the Celt, and Barney made a crack at him, but Frank said sternly:

"Enough of that! Be ready to leave here for the Black Valley at daybreak!"

"All roight, sor!"

Frank turned to enter the cabin, but Barney stepped before him.

"If yez plaze, sor," he said, "somewan left a letther here for yez not an hour since."

"A letter?" exclaimed Frank, in surprise.

Barney placed the epistle in his hand. The young inventor broke the seal by the cabin light, and read in a curious, foreign hand:

"FRANK READE, JR:—Fair warning! Death waits upon you if you are found in Tres Pinos twenty-four hours from now. No power can save you. Go while there is time. Fair warning!

"THE MYSTERIOUS BRAND."

Frank read and re-read this curious message. He studied the chirography and the paper. Then he thrust the letter into his pocket.

"Call me at daybreak, Barney," was all he said. "One of you go on guard, to be relieved by the other in four hours. We must have sleep."

A few moments later he was in his bunk fast asleep.

Left on deck, Barney and Pomp began to compare notes. They

were extremely curious as to the nature of the contents of the strange letter.

"Bejabers I'll take me 'davy it's from the ould divil hisself," declared the Celt. "Phat do yez say, naygur?"

"Ain' suttin 'bout dat," affirmed the coon; "wha' fo' should he write to Marse Frank?"

"Shure, yez are too thick-headed to see through anything!" sneered Barney.

"Hi, hi!" sniffed Pomp, angrily; "don' yo' git sassy wif mo, chile! Yo' git me mad fus' ting yo' know."

Barney's eyes danced.

This was just the opportunity he craved. If there was one thing that both of these practical jokers loved, it was a friendly scrap. And here was a most excellent excuse.

"Mad!" jeered the Celt, "I s'pose yez think that'll skeer me! Mebbe yez think I'm afraid av yez?"

Pomp shook his head like a mad bull.

"Yo' doa' want to say too much, honey! I'se all ready for a hot time!"

"Oh, yez are? Mebbe yez think I'll put up wid that insult?"

"Yo' kin do de nex' bes' fing!"

Then they glared at each other. Barney made a biff at the coon. Pomp dodged it.

The coon came back at the Celt with head down like a bull. Barney dodged and Pomp struck the iron rail of the Vigilant. The blow would have brained an ordinary man.

But not the coon.

He shook himself, wheeled and came back at his antagonist. Barney grappled with him and down they went.

Then followed the liveliest kind of a scrap.

For a time there was little advantage on either side. They tugged and panted, until each was so exhausted that he could not move.

"Well sah!" puffed Pomp. "Am yo' satisfied, sah?"

"Are yez?" asked Barney.

"I am if yo' am."

"Shure it's yure first watch. I'm off to bed."

"A'right! I'se gwine to call yo' in two hours, chile!"

Barney slid down into the cabin, while Pomp began to patrol the deck, and so ended the ruction.

The night passed quickly enough; with the dawn everybody was astir.

Tom Beck and Deming Chute came aboard, all equipped for the trip to the Black Valley. A great throng gathered before the hotel to see them off.

The Vigilant was soon under way. She ran quickly up the mountain trail, and came out on the high divide. Beyond this was the entrance to the Black Valley.

A heavy mist hung over it as they approached. Frank noted this, and Tom Beck said:

"That, I presume, is the poisonous vapor of which we must beware."

Frank studied it curiously.

He knew that it was not at all improbable that this vapor might be loaded with fatal gases. He was not so foolhardy as not to first investigate it.

So, as the Vigilant drew every moment nearer to the valley, the young inventor proceeded with due caution.

After a time the Vigilant reached the very border of the valley. It was a barren tract of sand dunes and marl, and sandstone buttes. The vapor came from orifices in the soil, similar to those made by hot geysers.

Frank now closed the windows and doors of the Vigilant. The critical moment had come.

The vehicle rolled out upon the sandy waste. In an instant small, white globules began to form on the steel outer work of the Vigilant.

Frank studied them closely through the pilot house window. He realized at once that this deposit had been attracted from the atmosphere where it had been held in solution.

"It looks like sodium or crystals of lime," he muttered; "doubtless it comes from the vapor."

He was exceedingly anxious to know the composite character of this substance. So he managed to secure some of the deposit.

He had a few chemicals on board with which he was able to make a fair analysis. This he did.

The result was that he soon announced triumphantly:

"There is nothing injurious to human life in this deposit."

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE BLACK VALLEY.

Tom Beck and Deming Chute listened to this announcement with surprise.

"Then the deadly gases of the valley are a hoax?" asked Deming.

"So far as our investigation goes. What else is held in the atmosphere I do not know. But we will soon find out."

With this Frank placed an open phial of chemicals out on the platform.

"If there is any poisonous gas in the atmosphere that chemical will boil," he said. "If not, it will gradually evaporate."

"It is not going to boil," said Tom Beck, eagerly.

"That is enough," said Frank. "The poisonous gases of Death Valley are all efforts of the imagination."

With which he pressed a button which opened every door and window. The air rushed in. Nobody, however, seemed affected by it.

It seemed a triumph for the young inventor. He had apparently disproved an old and long-standing tradition of the Tres Pinos region.

There seemed now no doubt but that his theory of the existence of the murderer's den in the mysterious valley was absolutely well founded. It only remained to locate that hiding place.

Then perhaps Ellice Chute could be rescued, and the perpetrator of the mysterious brand brought to justice.

Frank allowed the Vigilant to run along the eastern verge of the valley. He intended to first make a circuit of it.

If no likely hiding place was found, then he would draw the line closer and nearer the center of the valley. No part of it should go unexplored.

The further he went into the valley the better satisfied Frank became that it was of volcanic origin.

Doubtless it had once been a mighty crater, filled with lava and molten matter, flames and ashes. Time had obliterated most traces of the volcanic fires, and left only the geysers and hot springs.

No sign of animal life was apparent in the valley. If such existed it was not visible.

Wolves—those scavengers of the wilderness—were not even to be seen. Birds appeared to shun the desolate spot.

Frank noted all these things carefully. Yet in themselves he could see no tangible evidence that the valley was necessarily fatal to life even at intervals. Yet he proceeded with caution.

As they proceeded the mountain walls grew more and more sheer and precipitous.

They were rugged and bold, with little vegetation on their slopes. Frank studied them carefully.

Doubtless among them were caverns and pockets in plenty, where a band of outlaws could hide an indefinite period.

The more Frank studied on the matter the better satisfied he became that it was in all likelihood the real rendezvous of the gang which was terrorizing Tres Pinos. For he felt sure that it was a gang and not one man, which had heretofore been accepted as a fact.

Somewhere in this wild locality he believed they made their den. Just how to locate it was a puzzle.

Slowly the Vigilant rolled on deeper into the valley.

Frank and Chute with Tom Beck sat on the forward deck and kept their field glasses leveled upon the mountain slopes. They looked eagerly for some sign of a hidden foe.

But none appeared. To all appearance the place was as deserted and devoid of life as the heart of the Great Sahara.

"Well, I am beat!" exclaimed Chute. "I don't see how we are going to tell whether they have a rendezvous there or not, Mr. Reade!"

"Have patience," said Frank. "We will do it."

"If they are up there now, they are doubtless watching us!" said Tom.

"Yes!" agreed Frank; "they have a little the advantage of us in that respect."

It took the entire day to cross and make a circuit of the valley. Nightfall was at hand when the machine finally reached the base of the mountain cliffs again.

The night was cloudy and bade fair to be a dark one.

The Vigilant came to a halt in the desert about one hundred yards from the base of the cliff. It would seem as if the first day's work had yielded but little of value.

Naturally, Chute was nervous and impatient. He walked the deck of the Vigilant, wringing his hands.

"God help me," he groaned. "I fear I shall never see my dear Ellice again!"

"Don't give way to despair," said Frank, cheeringly. "The worst has not come yet. We may ward it off!"

"Heaven grant we may. But what is your plan now?"

"When nightfall comes I will tell you," said Frank.

"Oh, then you propose to work after dark?"

"If feasible. At least I shall do a little exploring to-night."

With this announcement the courage of the two men revived. Gradually the pall of night settled down.

Then Frank laid his plans.

"We will not move until the darkness is quite intense," he said, "then we three will leave the Vigilant, well armed, and creep up into the rocky fastnesses. I will use a bird call, which will be a signal to Barney and Pomp, if we need them."

Tom and Chute could hardly wait for the moment to come when they should undertake this affair. At length, however, it came.

When he was well satisfied that it was dark enough to make it safe to leave the Vigilant, Frank led the way over the rail.

In a few moments they were crossing the desert sands.

Silently like ghosts they flitted on. One could scarcely see his hand before him so dark was it.

It had been agreed that not a word was to be spoken. Signals were to be made with pressure of the hands.

It was but a short distance to the base of the mountain. But before they reached it, Frank had come to a sudden halt.

He sank down flat upon the sands as did his companions. The young inventor's quick ear had caught a startling sound.

It was repeated, and was to the best perception the rattling of gravel on a mountain path. Frank could draw but one conclusion.

Somebody was coming down the mountain side. Whether it was an individual or a gang of men he could only guess.

Both Chute and Tom Beck understood it all. The province of the explorers now was to keep quiet.

A moment more and the faint sound of footsteps was heard. All about them on the sands they were audible.

The truth was apparent.

Frank's conclusions were entirely correct. The villainous gang were coming down from their den to attack the Vigilant.

For a moment the young inventor's bosom thrilled.

"If I were only aboard the Vigilant now!" he whispered.

Then he thought of Barney and Pomp. They ought to be given the signal so as to be forewarned.

But to give it would be to betray themselves. Here was a quandary indeed. For a time Frank was perplexed.

Distinctly the three explorers could hear whispers and the faint crunching of feet about them. They could even almost feel the presence of the foe.

It seemed miraculous that they were not discovered as it was. But the unseen gang passed them all safely.

Frank did not lose time. He knew the risk of delay.

Already they were doubtless all about the machine. In the intense darkness it would be no difficult matter for them to surround it and dash aboard.

What the result would be for the two, Barney and Pomp, thus taken unawares, it was not easy to say. But Frank feared the worst.

He whispered to his companions:

"Follow me! quickly!"

He dashed straight for the base of the mountain. In a few moments they reached it safely.

Then Frank gave the signal. It rang out on the night air sharp and clear. Almost simultaneously the search-light of the Vigilant threw a mighty glare of light against the mountain wall.

Then the air resounded with hoarse yells and shouts. Dark forms swarmed for a moment about the Vigilant.

Then the rumble of wheels and the crack of rifles followed. Frank gave a cry of joy.

"Thank God!" he cried. "Barney was too keen for them and has slipped away with the Vigilant. We need fear no more for them. Come, friends, there is hot work before us."

"What are you going to do?" asked Tom Beck.

"We must find the rendezvous of this gang. Ah! What is that?"

Frank shrunk behind a bowlder, and Beck and Chute with him. At that moment dark forms appeared just above them.

Curses loud and deep resounded upon the night air.

"Confound you all for a set of lubbers! You ought to have caught them unawares."

It was Sydney Varian's voice.

Tom Beck quivered with the mad desire to fling himself upon the villain; but Frank restrained him.

"We would have succeeded," declared one of the baffled gang, "but they got a signal from this direction."

"A signal from here?"

"At least it sounded so, sir—the call of a night bird."

"That is queer," said Varian, in a puzzled manner. "They could not have got that signal from one of our men?"

"Oh, no, sir!"

"Then who could have given it?"

"Perhaps some of them have been trying our plan of a surprise."

A curse escaped Varian's lips.

"To work, all of you," he gritted. "Search every part of the mountain side here. I would give a fortune to catch some of the dogs! Ha! I would hang them up by their ears!"

In an instant torches flashed out. The outlaws began rushing hither and thither. They seemed all about.

It was a critical moment.

"Heaven help us," gasped Chute; "we are hemmed in. They will surely have our lives!"

"Fear not," whispered Frank. "We must defend ourselves. Oh, if we were only aboard the Vigilant now!"

Crouching behind the bowlder, the three men saw a number of the searchers closing in upon them. It seemed as if they must certainly be discovered.

But they steeled their nerves, and were resolved to sell their lives as dearly as possible. The next moment the turning point came.

CHAPTER VIII.

AROUND THE MOUNTAIN.

Barney and Pomp, after repulsing the attacking force, let the Vigilant run for a ways to get clear of the foe.

But they had no idea of keeping off. As soon as they were clear they took a wide circuit to return to the spot where Frank Reade, Jr., and his companions had been left.

So, just as it seemed to the three explorers that discovery was inevitable, there came a tremendous flash of light along the mountain wall, followed by a rattle of fire-arms.

With yells and curses the outlaws scrambled to the corner of the bowlders. But at least two of their numbers were left dead on the sands.

The next moment, with quick leaps, Frank and his companions were in the glare of the search-light. Barney and Pomp recognized them.

They were not seen by the outlaws until too late for them to act. Then the Vigilant was between them and the aim of the villains.

Quickly the three men sprung aboard. A moment more and they were in the cabin. Frank rushed forward.

He brought the Vigilant about so as to face the cliff. Then he opened the breach of the electric gun and placed a dynamite shell in it.

He pressed the valve of the pneumatic chamber and discharged the gun. The shell struck among the bowlders.

The effect was beyond description. The air was filled with flying particles of stone, dust, debris, and a literal cavity was blown into the side of the mountain.

A thunderbolt could hardly have caused more damage. Another and another of the shells were hurled at the mountain side.

It was safe to say that very few of the outlaws tarried in that locality. The nest of hornets was effectually dispersed.

Frank swept the mountain side with the search-light, and whenever he saw a sign of the foe he let drive at that point with a dynamite shell.

No human power could stand before anything so terrific. The side of the mountain soon looked as if an earthquake had rent it.

Of course little more could be done that night.

But Frank considered that a strong point had been gained. The foe had been located, and it was proved that an organized gang of outlaws were responsible for the outrages, which had for so long terrorized Tres Pinos.

There was no doubt but that Sydney Varian was their leader, and that Ellice Chute had been abducted by him.

What the work of the gang was or what was their purpose in so persecuting the denizens of Tres Pinos, it was not easy to guess. But that Sydney Varian had some deep purpose back of all was quite certain.

Chute and Tom Beck were for precipitate action. They thought it best to chase the foe to their lair.

But Frank was not of this opinion.

"That would be foolish as well as useless," he said. "We cannot climb this side of the mountain with the Vigilant. We must lay our plans slowly and with a fixed purpose. If not they will outwit us. Strategy will accomplish more than aught else!"

"Bejabers, they'd only shift to some other place," said Barney.

"Just so," agreed Frank. "We must hem them in here."

"But do you believe that possible?" asked Tom Beck.

"Not only possible, but certain."

"What—with our small force?"

"You shall see. You must remember that we have the powerful auxiliary of electricity to aid us."

"I defer all to you, Mr. Reade. I believe that if anybody can rescue my daughter you can."

Daylight came, and, after a brief nap, the rescuers were once more ready to go to work. Frank had spent some time in studying the matter.

He had formulated what he believed to be an excellent plan. As soon as the sun had risen he proceeded to put it into action.

He reasoned that the other side of the mountain was less precipitous than this. Undoubtedly some sort of a trail could be found there which would enable him to climb it.

So he started the Vigilant in that direction. No sign of the outlaws was visible anywhere.

The Vigilant crept along the base of the mountain, to where they had entered the Death Valley. Then Frank proceeded to circle the range of mountains.

At first many obstacles were encountered, but by pursuing a zigzag course, the machine worked its way most up to the summit.

From here a mighty view of the region about was to be had.

Mountain ranges extended far to the northward. On the east was the long valley in which was the little mining town of Tres Pinos.

The sides and summit of this mountain was largely composed of ledges. There were innumerable passes and pockets, and Frank realized that it would be an intricate task to look for the Varian gang in this region.

But it must be done, so the machine, with its clinging rubber tires, picked its way along over the heavy ledges, until some pass or cut blocked its way.

This necessitated many a detour so that the work was slow. All the while Frank was constantly studying the topography of the country.

"This is a region which ought to be rich in minerals!" he said. "I see no reason why. "Look at the quartz formations."

"I have never heard of gold being found up here!" said Chute; "but I will admit it is a likely place!"

"So indeed it is!" agreed Tom Beck. "I have often thought of prospecting up this way. There should be good placer diggings down below here!"

"We will leave that to a later day!" said Frank. "Just now, what absorbs us the most is the rescue of Ellice Chute!"

"Which we pray for!" said Tom.

The day waned before anything like a clew presented itself. Then Frank brought the machine around a bend in the mountain wall, and to the base of a scraggy peak, the highest point about.

Just below this was a curious, flat-topped hill or table land. It was a huge ledge of rock, as smooth as a floor, and covered an area of several square miles.

Its sides were precipitous as a rule, though at the south side what seemed like a broad roadway or trail led up to it. Frank looked it over attentively.

He noted that this table of rock or plateau was high above Tres Pinos valley, and from it a deep gulch cut down to the valley itself.

In that part of the plateau to the west, with the aid of his glass, he saw what looked like a cavity in the solid ledge. And as Frank gazed at it he fancied he saw once a human head appear and disappear in this cavity.

At once he exclaimed:

"There is where we shall find our game!"

"What?" exclaimed Deming Chute. "I see no place there where a mouse could hide!"

"But I do!" said Frank, confidently. "Just leave it to me. I believe we have discovered the den!"

"Let us descend upon it then!" cried Tom, anxiously.

"No," said Frank, cautiously, "it will not do just yet. We must not even allow them to suspect that we have a clew."

"But I see no clew."

"I do, though, and I will reveal it to you later."

"What is your plan?"

"We will feign ignorance of any knowledge of the plateau, and direct our course to some other part of the mountain. After dark we will once more try our abilities as scouts."

"Very good!"

So the Vigilant went rumbling down the other side of the mountain to disarm any possible suspicion of the foe.

Time passed, and finally once again darkness settled down. The Vigilant, under its cover, slowly regained the summit of the mountain.

This time the machine was halted at the base of a high cliff. The search-light sent its glare down the mountain side.

It was fully half a mile over the mountain wall to the gulch beyond, which was the plateau.

In order to leave the Vigilant without being seen, the three explorers were obliged to creep over the stern and drop down into shadows under the cliff. Then they crept along this and finally were in the darkness beyond.

All were well armed, and Barney and Pomp had their instructions what to do in case of a signal.

Silently and shadow-like the trio crept down into the gulch. It required nearly an hour of cautious climbing to reach the plateau.

Then it was easy to approach the cavity which Frank believed might be the entrance to the outlaws' stronghold.

As they drew near it a faint twinkle of light was seen. Then Frank came to a halt.

"Listen!" he whispered.

A whispering murmur, something like the droning of bees, came to the ears of the listeners on the night breeze.

It was the unmistakable sound of human voices.

After a moment the sound ceased. Frank had sank down upon the stone surface of the plateau. Something prompted him to put his ear to it.

A strange sound rewarded it. He listened very intently. It was a curious clicking sound, given at intervals.

"What do you make of it?" he asked of his companions.

"It baffles me!" said Chute.

"And me!" said Tom.

"It seems to come from the interior of the plateau!"

"Yes!"

"Then it is as good indication as we may desire that there is a cavern or underground passage under us."

"Yes!"

"Do you hear another sound?"

"The rushing of water!"

"Exactly! No doubt there is an underground stream of some sort down there. One thing is certain. We have surely found the retreat of the outlaws!"

"I believe you."

"And Ellice," said Tom Beck, excitedly, "must be hidden down there at this moment."

"No doubt of it!" said Frank.

CHAPTER IX.

BESIEGING THE OUTLAWS.

ARRIVED at this logical conclusion, it was now certainly a question of no small sort just how to effect the rescue of the captive girl.

To do this successfully, meant the employment of no small amount of strategy, as all were bound to admit.

But Frank Reade, Jr., was equal to the occasion. A hundred plans were already revolving in his brain.

Now that the outlaws' stronghold was positively located, another thing began to puzzle Frank.

This was the occupation of this gang of outlaws. There were few stages to hold up from Tres Pinos, and little booty to be obtained in that manner. Beyond the outrages of the mysterious band, little in the nature of robbery or high crime occurred in the region.

So it was certainly curious that a full fledged gang of outlaws, such as these were, could get a living in such a dry country. If they did not make it by pillage and crime, how else could they make it?

Frank was unable to solve this question, but he did not abandon it by any means. He was now fully determined to solve the riddle.

After listening some while longer, the trio of explorers began to creep nearer to the cavity in the ledge. Now again human voices were heard.

Also a faint light gleamed in the cavity. Nearer to the verge they crept.

Frank actually reached it and peered over the edge. He saw a deep pit-like descent, with rude steps cut in the stone.

A faint light burned in the side of this pit. The passage leading from it took an oblique turn, and nothing more could be seen.

In his eagerness, the young inventor was tempted to drop down into the place and explore it further, but sober reflection taught him the folly of this.

He would be almost certainly detected, and death could not fail to be his lot.

So he did nothing rash. Listening for some while, he finally crept back to where his companions awaited him. It was a baffling situation.

There was plainly no way of getting an idea of the extent of the cavern or its ramifications. Whether this was the only entrance or not was also unknown.

While Frank had been gone Tom Beck and Chute had been listening to the curious clicking sound under them. Now they announced to Frank a belief that they had solved the mystery.

"Ah!" cried the young inventor in delight. "What is your belief?"

"That we are over a mine!"

"A mine?"

"Yes!"

The young inventor was astonished.

"That is curious!" he declared; "how can it be? What makes you think so?"

"That clicking sound we hear is the work of pick-axes and drills!"

A light broke over Frank's face.

"Of course!" he ejaculated. "Why did I not think of that before? On my word that is strange. Do you think it really a mine?"

"What else?"

"They might possibly be extending their cavern."

But Deming Chute shook his head.

"I see now an explanation of many curious things concerning Sydney Varian," he said. "I can understand where all his money came from which he spent so lavishly. The very formation of the country here bespeaks the presence of great deposits of gold!"

Frank was now convinced.

"Gentlemen, you are right," he agreed. "At least I think so. This is a secret gold mine!"

"And may this fact not explain the cause of the use of that deadly, mysterious brand?"

"Indeed yes!" cried Frank; "the fear that the mine might be discovered, might furnish sufficient incentive for the terrorizing and ultimate extinction of Tres Pinos."

Chute shook his head slowly.

"Ah!" he exclaimed; "that fellow Varian is the biggest rascal I ever heard of. What a long-headed, black-hearted scheme!"

"Our plan now is first to rescue Ellice," said Tom Beck. "And then to sail in and exterminate Varian and his gang."

"That is right!" agreed Chute. "It is only a question of how!"

With this they crept back to the edge of the plateau and began discussing plans. It seemed too bad to return to the Vigilant without having accomplished more. Yet what could be done?

It was once thought feasible to dress one of the party in buckskin and let him try to gain admittance in this disguise as one of the gang. But second thought showed it not possible.

In some way the secret mine must be invaded.

But how?

Ah, there was the rub. For a full hour the matter was talked over. Then a series of incidents brought about that which proved a golden opportunity for our rescuers.

Suddenly as they crouched at the edge of the plateau, footsteps were heard. Then there came a shrill whistle.

The next moment a tall figure stood close by the crouching rescuers. They could almost have touched the unknown.

The whistle was answered by another down the gulch. Then another figure appeared on the scene.

"Hello, Jake! It's you, is it?"

"Ay, Mr. Varian. What do you want?"

It was Sydney Varian who stood so near our friends. His voice was easily recognized.

"You are sure, Jake, that nobody has got by you to-night? You have kept close guard?"

"Ay, sir. You may be sure of that."

"Good! They are encamped with their infernal machine on Snow Peak. Well, let them stay there. Now, look out for prowlers."

"All right, sir!"

Varian turned away slowly. The picket guard, for such he was, turned to go down from the plateau, but he stumbled over Tom Beck's prostrate form.

What followed was swift and silent. Like a panther Tom was on his feet, and before the dazed picket could utter the slightest outcry, Tom had his throat.

A blow on the head brought him down in a senseless heap. Then young Beck sprang up onto the plateau.

Varian had turned.

"What's the matter, Jake?" he asked.

But at that moment two dark forms rushed upon him in the gloom. He made a smothered outcry, but a jacket was flung over his head and held him speechless.

In an instant his hands were tied and he was a prisoner.

"Quick!" whispered Frank. "We must get him up to the Vigilant. I hear voices now!"

Indeed the alarm seemed to have spread across the plateau. Footsteps were already heard.

So the trio of explorers rushed their prisoner into the dark shadows of the gulch. Half an hour later they saw the light of the Vigilant ahead.

Frank gave the signal cry and the Vigilant's lights went out. Then the party with their prisoner approached the machine silently and with care.

In a few moments they were safely aboard. Then Sydney Varian's muzzling was removed. The scene was one for an artist.

Like a mad beast at bay, the captured villain glared at his captors; then he writhed fiercely in his bonds and foamed at the lips.

But in vain.

He was a hopeless prisoner.

Opposite him sat Deming Chute gazing at him stonily. When the wretch had become more composed Chute said:

"Well, Sydney Varian, the mysterious brand has at last been captured. The end of this mysterious reign of terror in Tres Pinos has come. Your life is in our hands. We will be justified in hanging you."

"You have no right to attack an honest citizen!" raved Varian. "You have no proof of my guilt."

"Better proof no court of law will ask. But there shall be given you a chance."

The eyes of the villain gleamed in a devilish and cunning way.

"What is it?" he asked, steadily.

"That you return to me my daughter Ellice safe and sound."

"Do you mean it?"

"Yes!"

"I accept your offer. Set me free and I will send her to you within the hour."

"We will send one of our party to the plateau with an order from you for her deliverance," said Chute, steadily.

"Then, when she is in your hands," sneered Varian, "you will hang me!"

"No, sir! Our word is sacred."

"Mine is as good as yours!"

"We will not discuss the point," said Chute, tersely. "These are our terms. Accept them or not as you choose!"

"I will think it over."

"Let your time be brief."

The villain was silent for some moments and seemed to be listening. Chute watched him like a cat.

He devined exactly what was in the prisoner's mind. It drew a scornful smile from his lips.

"No use, Sydney Varian!" he said. "You are listening for your followers coming to the rescue. You may as well know the truth. It is not in their power to rescue you!"

The distant dull murmur of a crowd was heard and lights were flashing in all parts of the plateau. There was no doubt but that the robber gang were really coming to attempt the rescue.

As Chute said, however, it would be a futile task.

The entire gang of outlaws could hope to do but little against the electric gun of the Vigilant. A few bombs from it would sweep them out of existence.

Already Frank and Barney were making preparations to resist the attack which seemed sure to come.

And there was a light of hope in Varian's eyes. He listened eagerly and his eyes were like glittering beads.

"We shall see!" he said, confidently. "One thing is sure. If my men capture you, not one of you will escape alive!"

"We expect nothing more," replied Chute. "We shall not, however, fall into their hands."

Tom Beck with Barney and Pomp were already in the pilot house with their rifles, ready to give the attacking force a hot reception.

And they had not long to wait. The opportunity quickly came.

CHAPTER X.

AN IMPORTANT CAPTURE.

The picket, knocked senseless by Tom Beck, had recovered, and realizing the true state of affairs, had hastened to give the alarm.

Of course, the entire outlaw gang had turned out, ready to fight for the rescue of their leader.

They did not go to the attack unaware of what it would be necessary for them to face. The little conflict on the other side of the mountain had opened their eyes.

They knew the awful power of the electric gun, and many of them shrank from facing it.

But others were reckless and dare devil. Life held little of value for them, and they did not fear death.

This element predominated in the Varian gang. It is the sentiment which makes heavy fighters.

Down from the plateau and across the gulch the outlaws swarmed. They were no despicable array.

As they came to the attack they made the night air hideous with their cries. They had at once opened fire upon the Vigilant.

Barney and Pomp and Tom Beck had at once answered. Then followed a lively fusillade.

The bullets did little harm to the machine. But many an outlaw was laid low by the return fire.

For Barney and Pomp and Tom Beck worked the repeating rifles for all they were worth. It was no slight affair to keep this up.

The line of outlaws, however, did not stop. It came on as bold as before. It was when he saw that he was severely menaced that Frank ordered the dynamite gun to be used.

Barney was familiar with this task, and soon had the big gun cleared for action. Then came one of the grandest hours of the entire expedition for the Celt.

He had the full use of the gun, and though under Frank's orders, they were not specific. It gave the little Irishman much latitude, and he proceeded to make use of it.

He waited by Frank's command until it became certain that the rifle fire was not adequate to stop the foe. Then he trained the dynamite gun upon the foe point blank.

To avoid slaughter he sent a bomb into a clump of brush just in advance of the foe. Instantly a mighty heap of debris, stones and water and other things rose to a tremendous height in the air.

For a moment the outlaws were staggered and paused in dismay. The bomb had raised an obstacle before them.

But now they divided and came at the Vigilant from two directions. This was the best move they had yet made.

Barney could give his attention to but one party. It devolved upon the others to hold the other party at bay with their rifles.

But this was done easily enough. Once again the electric gun spoke.

This time the bomb struck a heap of bowlders and reduced them to atoms. The particles flew in all directions, and a number of the outlaws were laid low by them.

"That is it, Barney!" cried Frank, "give it to them. They are already inclined to retreat."

"Bejabers, I will, sor!" cried the Celt, excitedly. "Have no fear, sor, we'll give them batin' enough!"

The outlaws certainly displayed rare pluck. They came to the attack again full force. But again Barney repulsed them.

This proved final. They retreated to the plateau with baffled yells. Now Frank decided to take the initiative.

He gave the order to advance to the attack.

"Make the plateau, Barney!" he cried. "We will break up this nest of vipers to-night if we can!"

"All roight, sor!"

Barney started the machine to cross the gulch. Deming Chute was beside himself with mental apprehension.

"Oh, I fear for Ellice!" he groaned. "At the mercy of that lawless gang, what will be her fate?"

"Have courage!" said Frank, cheerily; "I think we can give her aid very soon now. We will try."

"If harm does come to her," said Beck, resolutely, "this wretch, Sydney Varian, shall hang!"

In the cabin of the Vigilant, Varian had listened eagerly to the attack. When he learned that it had proved a repulse, he was fiercely angered.

"The fools and cowards!" he gritted, with a volley of black curses. "I wish the fiends would pursue them. They know I am here and it is only cowardice which holds them back."

"They have fought well for you, sir," said Chute, reprovingly. "You do not deserve it. Neither would you dare face the certain death which they have faced."

Varian's manner soon changed. He became servile and humble. It seemed as if his spirit was broken.

He even began to plead abjectly for his life.

"You will not deliver me up to be hanged?" he begged. "For the love of Heaven show me mercy."

"Just such mercy as you showed those unfortunate victims of the mysterious brand," said Chute.

"Then you will hang me?"

"Do you expect to escape justice?"

A wail escaped the cowardly villain's lips. He trembled and became as white as a corpse.

He saw plainly that it was of no use to plead with his captors. His black deeds of the past were against him, and they were beyond pardon.

He could expect nothing but death.

"Your life was spared once through misapprehension of Mr. Reade," said Chute, inexorably. "You should have been lynched then. My Ellice would be with me to-day."

Varian's eyes glittered.

"Will you spare my life, set me free, if I will deliver your daughter up to you safe and well?" he asked again.

"Yes!" replied Chute, promptly.

"But you will give me no chance. To do this, it will be necessary for me to go to my men and confer with them."

"We know too much of your treachery to permit that. But if you will agree to it we will parley with your men. You can even speak to them yourself."

Varian's cunning brain had conceived a new plan. At the moment it looked to him feasible enough.

Why could he not deliver up his prize now with perfect safety? At some later day he would scheme to again recover it. Above all things he must preserve his life.

So he said:

"I will accept your terms."

In delight Chute hurried to Frank. The young inventor listened with grave face.

"To be sure," he said. "You will recover your daughter, but this nest of vipers——"

"It may be broken up just the same. I ngroe only to set Sydney Varian free. If he falls into our hands again it is his own peril."

"Very well," said Frank. "When wo reach the plateau we will endeavor to call a parley."

Day was already appearing in the east. The sun would soon show itself over the distant hills.

It was quite light when the Vigilant finally succeeded in gaining the plateau. Frank at once hung a white flag on the pilot house.

At the distant entrance to the secret mine, this was seeu by the outlaws. They also displayed one.

In a few moments one of them approached under cover of the truce. Ho came up within speaking distance of the machine.

Then Sydney Varian appeared on the deck, and a colloqny ensued:

"Ah, is that you, Martin Riley?" asked the villain.

"Yes, sir," was the reply. "We have done all we could to rescue you. sir. I suppose you have mnde terms with those people?"

"I have, Martin," replied Varian. "I want you to bring the young girl who is confined in chamber 10 in the lower mine to this spot. Go in all haste. See that harm comes not to her on your life!"

The outlaw bowed, but did not hasten to obey the command.

"Well?" asked Varian, angrily. "What is the matter now? Why don't you go?"

"If you please, sir. I cannot do what you bid me."

"You cannot!" roared Varian. "What do you mean, you dog?"

"The youug girl, sir——"

"Well?"

"She is no longer in the mine!"

Varian's face turned from white to purple and back again. It seemed for a moment as if he was in an epileptic fit.

"Hound!" he screamed. "You dare come here and tell me this? Where is she—what has become of her?"

"We know not, sir. But her chamber is empty, and she is gone. The Mexican, Valery, sir—he is also gone, and——"

"A thousand furies!" yelled the maddened outlaw chief. "I suspected Valery of treachery. He will force her to marry him, and then he will take her to Mexico. You see, gentlemen," turning to Frank and Chute, who had listened with horror, "I am no longer sponsor of her fate. God help her if she is in the hands of that Mexican devil! I may as well tell you now that Valery is the devil who carried the mysterious brand and accomplished all those murders which have so terrorized Tres Pinos."

"At your instigation!" cried Frank.

"As you please. But the fact remains that Ellice Chute is in the power of that devil. I have done all I could to fulfill my compact. I offer you my services and those of my men to track him down. You promised me my life on a condition. This is the nearest I can come to fulfilling that condition."

"But you are responsible for the work of Jose Valery, of whom I have heard!" cried Tom Beck; "why should you ask for mercy?"

"I am repentant. Spare my life and I swear to aid you to track down Valery and recover the girl!"

Frank and Chute exchanged glances.

"How shall we be assured of this pledge?" asked Frank.

"I will remain as hostage for myself, right here. Only promise me that you will spare my life. I will give all my aid in tracking down Valery. My game in this part of the world is run. I am done with the secret mine. What shall it be?"

"We can have no better surety," said Frank to Chute.

"I am willing," agreed the latter.

"And you, Tom Beck?"

"I am the same!"

Frank turned to the prisoner.

"Your offer is accepted," he said. "We shall expect good faith from you."

"And good faith you shall have!" declared the villain. "Do not fear for that. I seek now only revenge upon Valery who got me into this scrape in the first place. He is a treacherous dog!"

CHAPTER XI.

ON TO DANE CITY.

"ONE question," asked Frank. "Was Jose Valery your accomplice in the persecution of the citizens of Tres Pinos?"

"He was the executor of the entire scheme," said Varian. "I only lent to it my sympathy."

"Yet you did not actually co-operate with him?"

"Never!"

"In what way, then, was he your partner?" asked Frank.

Solely in the operation of the secret mine—the digging of gold unbeknown to any of the Tres Pinos people. We discovered a rich lead, and wished to keep it to ourselves."

"But—what was Valery's purpose in terrorizing the people of Tres Pinos? Why did he use the mysterious brand?"

"It was his purpose to endeavor to depopulate the entire region," confessed the villain. "He hoped to drive every living soul from Tres Pinos."

"But why?"

Varian was silent a moment.

Then he said:

"Well, I have done with this part of the world forever. I may as well tell the truth. Beneath the very town of Tres Pinos, Valery has run galleries and shafts, and discovered rich gold workings. This is why he wished to drive all people from Tres Pinos."

This was an astonishing revelation.

"And for the sake of that paltry gold he committed all those atrocious murders?"

"Yes!"

"And you—you knew it all the time. Were his accomplice?"

"Not an active accomplice. Indeed I have tried to dissuade him, but in vain. Believe me, gentlemen, I was not so bad!"

"Hanging is a better fate than you deserve," declared Frank. "But we have promised to give you your life, and we shall do so. Now what is the best plan we can pursue?"

Varian was reflective.

"I am to remain on board here as hostage for myself?" he asked.

"It was your offer!"

"Very well. Of course, I could do better at the head of my men. But I cannot blame you for not trusting me. I will give orders to Riley here, and then I will advise you!"

He advanced to the rail.

"Riley," he said, "mount every man with provisions for three days' march. Then take the trail to Dane City. Go by the North Canyon and we will meet you there."

"All right, sir!"

Riley touched his cap and went back to the secret mine. Then Varian turned to his captors.

"Our best plan is to take the trail across Black Prairie," he said. "We shall meet Riley and his men at Dane City and by this route cut off the Mexican and the young girl."

"Then you are sure he went in that direction?" asked Chute.

"As sure as it is possible to be. Valery will cut for the Rio Grande and the Mexican line direct. We must head him off before he gets out of the States. How fast can we travel?"

And he looked the Vigilant over critically. Frank smiled.

"Faster than Valery's horse," he said. "We will get to Dane City before your men, Mr. Varian."

"Good! Then I believe we shall head off Valery. Let us start at once!"

No time was lost.

The sun was now quite well up in the sky. Frank started the Vigilant down the mountain.

It was necessary to descend by the old trail to Tres Pinos, and this meant a passing through the town. Very soon the machine had left the Black Valley to the north and had struck the big trail.

Chute's cabin next came into view. Then a short while later, Tres Pinos, with its cluster of cabins, became visible.

The streets of the little mining town were densely thronged.

News had reached the denizens of the place that there had been fighting up in the mountains, and that the Vigilant's party had come out victorious.

Of course the entire populace turned out to welcome the returning party. The villainy of Sydney Varian had become known, and there was an excited call for his head. The feeling was most intense.

Lynch law in the mines is always the strongest. The Westerner's idea of justice is short and swift.

So when the Vigilant rolled down into the town there was a tremendous uproar. It was instantly surrounded by a yelling throng.

They shouted for Varian.

"Bring out the monster!"

"Death to the assassin!"

"Hang him!"

"Kill him!"

"Vengeance!"

These and many other cries made the air horrid. Frank and Chute as well as Tom Beck were surprised.

"It can't be possible that they will attempt to take the prisoner from us?" asked Frank.

Chute was very pale.

"We ought not to have come to Tres Pinos," he said; "I fear we shall have a great deal of trouble. Yes, they will take the prisoner from us if they can!"

Frank's face grew rigid.

His eyes flashed.

"We shall see!" he said, resolutely. "The prisoner belongs to us for the present. Nobody shall interfere. When we get ready to deliver a prisoner up to them, we will do it, but not before!"

"Then I beg of you to temporize with them," said Chute. "Don't let them know that Varian is aboard."

"They seem to know it."

"That is very odd. I cannot imagine how they got their information."

"Nor I."

The dense throng of excited and armed men now surrounded the Vigilant. The situation was by no means a pleasant one.

"Give up the dog to us!"

"We will give him justice!"

"He must hang!"

Frank stepped out on the forward platform and motioned for silence. Then he addressed the crowd.

"We have not yet captured the assassin!" he cried. "We are now on his trail. We shall go to Dane City by the quickest route, and there hope to come up with him. One thing you may know—we have scattered the outlaw gang, and they will never more trouble Tres Pinos."

The crowd listened intently.

Then a cry arose again.

"Give up the prisoner!"

"Let us lynch him!"

"The assassin is still at large," replied Frank. "I cannot give him to you until I capture him."

The crowd gradually gave way. Frank, with Tom Beck and Chute waved their hands smilingly at the miners as the Vigilant moved on.

Then as they cleared the crowd a mighty shout went up:

"Hurrah for Frank Reade, Jr.!"

"Hurrah for the Vigilant!"

"Hurrah! hurrah!"

The echoes went rumbling through the valley. But not until the Vigilant was far beyond the town did our voyagers feel at all easy.

Then Frank Reade, Jr., exclaimed:

"Thank Heaven!"

"Amen!" said Tom Beck. "I tell you we fooled them well."

Sydney Varinn in the cabin had heard all. When he realized that his captors had kept their promise, and that he had not been delivered up to death, he seemed much affected.

"You have kept your word," he said. "And I will keep mine. You shall see!"

On ran the Vigilant. The valley now opened wider, the hills fell away on either side, and the broad expanse of the North Prairie stretched out to view.

The surface was as level as a floor. This was just what Frank wanted, and he proceeded to surprise his passengers.

He let the machine out at full speed. She sped like an arrow over the broad expanse.

Chute and Tom Beck held their breath. Their eyes bulged.

"Great guns!" exclaimed Beck, in amazement. "This beats me! It's greater than riding on a locomotive. How fast are we going, Mr. Reade?"

"About a forty-mile clip!" replied Frank. "The Vigilant can run faster."

"Gee whiz!" exclaimed Beck; "this is fast enough for me. What if we should strike a stump or projecting stone?"

"We would be likely to get a jolt," said Frank; "but I hardly think we will; Barney has keen eyes!"

Barney was at the key-board and Pomp was singing a plantation song in the cook-room. The two jokers were as jolly as ever.

On ran the Vigilant, until naught but the great expanse of the plain like a rolling sea was about them. The mountains and hills bordering it had long since sunk from view.

Nearly the entire day the machine ran on thus, among clumps of mesquite and cacti. Then they came to a wide and smoothly rolling river.

It was not a difficult matter to ford this, however, and on they went until dark.

Then far in the distance a rolling series of foot-hills could be seen. Chute looked critically at these and said:

"They are twenty-five miles away. Dane City is just under that lower chain. At this rate we ought to be there by nine o'clock."

"And we will," replied Frank.

"Can we travel after dark?"

"Certainly!"

As soon as darkness shut down, the search-light was brought into play. It made a pathway of light directly ahead.

It was as easy for the machine to run by this as if it had been daylight. So no time was lost.

Nearer they drew to these foothills. Then suddenly an unexpected thing happened.

Frank and Tom Beck were on the forward platform, keeping a sharp watch. Suddenly from over the prairie to the north came a shrill feminine scream.

It was repeated twice. Then the two men exchanged startled glances.

"A woman's scream!" ejaculated Tom Beck. "Do you think it means anything?"

"It must!" cried Frank, and he sprung into the pilot house.

In a moment he turned the head of the Vigilant in that direction. Then he sent the search-light's rays traveling across the plain.

At first nothing could be seen. The Vigilant ran on madly.

Then suddenly from a clump of mesquite two horses and riders sprang forth.

They were fully half a mile distant. But even at that distance, in the glare of the electric light, they were recognized.

A man and a woman, and the latter was bound to her horse. That it was Valery and Ethice Chute there was no doubt.

The wildest of excitement reigned on board the Vigilant now. Tom Beck could hardly contain himself.

"After them!" cried Chute, wildly. "We must catch them now. Oh, God help us to do so!"

But the Vigilant was already speeding like the wind after the fleeing villain and his prize. In a very few minutes at that rate he would have been overtaken.

But again fate interposed a remorseless hand, and the pursuers were cheated of their purpose.

Suddenly and without warning an unlookedfor catastrophe happened.

The Vigilant gave a terrific plunge, a lurch, and then stopped with her bow deeply buried in the sands of the prairie.

Frank and Deming Chute were thrown completely over the rail, and alighted with quite a severe shock upon the floor of the prairie. Not one on board but was thrown in some direction.

It was a most unlookedfor and unwelcome denouement.

CHAPTER XII.

WHICH ENDS THE TALE.

FRANK was the first to pick himself up. To say that he was astonished would be expressing it mildly.

For a moment he could hardly collect his senses or strictly realize what had occurred.

Then Chute appeared at his side, limping and pallid.

"My soul!" exclaimed the magnate of Tres Pinos. "What has happened, Mr. Reade?"

"I—I hardly know myself!" replied Frank, in a dazed way. "We must have struck something!"

"I should say so. I feel as if I'd fallen from the moon. Has the machine gone to pieces?"

"I think not!"

"But—the pursuit——"

"Will have to be abandoned for the present, I fear," said Frank.

Chute groaned in despair.

"My soul!" he exclaimed. "And we were so near the fleeing villain. Oh, is there nothing can be done? Can we not continue on foot?"

"It would be useless," said Frank. "He is mounted and would outstrip us. We will do better to see what can be done with the Vigilant first."

Barney and Pomp and Tom Beck now appeared on the scene. All were exceedingly lame and stiff.

"I thought the end of the world had come," said Tom.

"Bejabers, I niver had such a jumpin' about in me loife!" cried Barney.

"Golly, mah back am jes' about broke!" declared Pomp.

The cause of the accident was quickly located. The machine, going at terrific speed, had plunged head on into a deep quagmire.

The forward wheels were deep in the ooze. No effort of the machinery was sufficient to draw them out.

"It's struck we surely are," cried Barney. "Shure, that divil will get away with the poor leddy now!"

"It looks bad," said Frank, "yet one can never tell. We may overreach him yet. We must get to work and get the machine out of this."

"Give a hand, all!" cried Tom Beck. "Perhaps we can lift her out."

The effort was made. The five men with their united effort actually moved the sunken wheels. But their foot-hold was not secure enough.

"If we could get something solid to stand on!" cried Chute, "I think we could get her out."

Nearby was a small grove of oak. Frank procured axes and soon several small live oaks were felled.

They were cleared of branches and long poles made of them. The brush was heaped into the quagmire.

In this way it was partly filled up, and after a time they were able to get a couple of the poles placed under the broad tires of the machine. This proved the lucky wedge.

The machinery now was called upon. The wheels revolved slowly and gradually as the rubber tires clung to the saplings. The Vigilant drew its nose slowly out of the mire.

Slowly and steadily it backed out of the trap. Soon the wheels were once again upon hard ground.

Frank made a quick examination and found that nothing was broken. All was intact, though saturated with mire.

Barney and Pomp, however, quickly cleaned this away, and the Vigilant was once more able to proceed.

But much valuable time had been lost. The outlaw captor had doubtless placed many miles between himself and his pursuers.

It was once more a random quest.

However, the pursuers once more clambered aboard the machine, and it again raced away over the plain. This time Frank made a long detour to the west and north.

He knew that Valery would be apt to bear to the south and west. In this way Frank hoped to be fortunate enough to cut him off while he was yet in the open country.

If he could only get between him and the foothills, then the Mexican would be apt to go further north and run the risk of falling into the clutches of Varian's men.

The chance was exceedingly good. Until long past midnight the Vigilant continued on this detour.

The search-light continually swept the plain in all directions.

But even if Valery and his prize had been anywhere within its scope, the dense quantities of mesquite and cacti would have furnished him with concealment.

So the chances were not of the best, for should the villain divine the purpose of his pursuers, he might double on his tracks and leave them to pursue a futile quest.

Altogether the outlook was not of the most encouraging. To add to all a most unexpected discovery was made.

During the job of getting the Vigilant out of the quagmire, little attention had been paid to Sydney Varian.

The prisoner, securely bound, had been left in the after cabin. The Vigilant had been hours on her northward course before anybody thought of him.

Then Frank threw open the cabin door. He gave a start and an excited cry:

"Heigho! What does this mean?"

In an instant the other voyagers were by his side.

The discovery was as startling as it was dismaying. The cabin was empty. The prisoner was gone.

Upon the rich carpet lay the bits of cord which had bound him. How he had cut his bonds they could not guess.

But he had done so and made his escape. This was seen to be a certain and unpleasant fact.

Chute and Tom Beck felt the worst about it. But Frank said:

"After all, it is of not so great importance. The gang of outlaws is broken up, and his prestige is gone. He must seek new fields for villainy."

"It must be our purpose then to find Valery," said Chute.

"That is all. Once we have rescued your daughter we may return to Tres Pinos easy in mind. Your town will be relieved of its curse, and that will be the end of it."

So no backward move was made to overtake and recapture Varian. His liberty was assured.

The morning light soon began to appear in the east.

With the dispelling of the dense gloom, Frank began to study the horizon. Suddenly he distinguished a dark, moving line in the north.

Nearer it drew, and then he gave an exclamation:

"Horsemen!" he exclaimed; "they are no doubt Martin and his followers!"

This proved a fact.

The outlaws, as commanded by Varian, had passed through North Canyon and made the prairie country. They were now on their way to join the Vigilant and Varian.

As they drew nearer, Frank and Chute were somewhat puzzled how to meet them. The latter said:

"We can assume that Varian has gone on by a shorter route to Dane City, which he has doubtless done."

"Correct!" agreed Frank; "they will never suspect that he has escaped."

"Just so."

Nearer drew the mounted outlaws. Soon they were all about the Vigilant, and Riley shouted:

"Where is Varian?"

"Have you seen anything of Valery?" asked Frank, evasively.

"Not a sign. Have you?"

"Yes. We gave him chase and he rode this way."

"We should have met him."

"Yes."

"Where is Varian?"

"He has gone to Dane City by another route," replied Frank. "You are to scour these plains and find Valery and the girl."

"Those are your orders?"

"Yes."

"All right! In what direction will you go?"

"We will bear to the west and south if you will go west and north. Ride for a day, and then come back to Dane City."

"All right!"

The next moment the outlaw gang dashed away across the northern prairie. Frank and Chute gripped their hands.

"They suspected nothing," exclaimed the magnate, "and we still have their co-operation."

"Exactly."

"Nothing could be better."

"Nothing!"

"And now——"

"We will go south and west."

"You think it our best course?"

"Yes. Valery will certainly work toward the Mexican border, and he will have to go in that direction to make it."

"You are right."

The Vigilant ran until the noon hour upon her new course. Then suddenly a couple of high, wooded buttes rose from the plain before them.

Something impelled Frank to turn the Vigilant toward them. In a short while they reached their base.

Between them was a green hollow or dale fringed with mesquite. As the Vigilant ran past it a strange signal came to the ears of all.

The neigh of a horse.

In an instant every man was upon his feet. Frank brought the Vigilant about quickly.

The sound came from this green dale beyond the mesquite. Frank felt sure of his game.

He put on all speed and sent the Vigilant crashing through the cacti. The next moment the machine was in the glade.

The scene revealed was a most astounding one.

Two horses were tethered at the base of the butte, where a camp fire burned. Sitting with her back against the cliff was a young girl, securely bound.

It was Ellice Chute.

One instant all looked in that direction. Tom Beck and Chute, with joyful shouts, leaped from the Vigilant's deck and rushed to the side of the fair captive.

That was a joyful meeting.

But the attention of Frank Reade, Jr., Barney and Pomp was claimed by a far more thrilling sight. In the center of the glade two men were locked in a life and death struggle.

To the amazement of the new-comers they saw that one of them was Sydney Varian, and the other the Mexican, Valery.

It was easy to understand that Varian, after his escape from the Vigilant, had by chance come upon the camp of the Mexican abductor.

It was natural that they should meet now as deadly foes. In a moment they were locked in a deadly embrace, their weapons being knives.

A terrible struggle it was. None of our adventurers felt called upon to interfere. So they fought unmolested.

Panting and struggling, they swayed across the glade. Once Valery's knife sank in the side of Varian. The latter gasped, but only seemed to gain strength.

He made one mad, supreme effort, and overcoming the wily Mexican's guard, he sank his knife in the other's throat. The wretch coughed, gasped, and his head fell forward as the blood welled from his mouth.

Down both sank. Varian was just alive when Frank reached his side.

"Curse—the wretch!" gritted the dying villain. "You will find the mysterious brand—on—him. I—have rid Tres Pinos and the world of—a—brute!"

Then his spirit fled.

The two villains were buried on the spot. Then Ellice Chute and her father and lover went aboard the Vigilant.

No time was lost in returning to Tres Pinos. There Frank Reade, Jr., and Barney and Pomp met with a tremendous ovation.

The miners, wild with gratitude and joy, made a mighty demonstration. And well they could afford to, for the Vigilant and her plucky young owner had rendered them a great service.

Tres Pinos was freed from its curse. Once more the lives of its citizens were safe.

To-day Tres Pinos is one of the thriving cities of New Mexico. The gold mines are worked by an honest syndicate and everything is prosperous and bright.

Deming Chute is yet the magnate of the town, while Tom Beck and his beautiful young wife lead the social life.

But none will ever forget the valiant service done them by Frank Reade, Jr., and the Vigilant.

The young inventor, with Barney and Pomp, returned to Readestown, where he is at present engaged in serious study upon a new invention. There let us leave him for the present.

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